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The Future of Cats in a Changing World

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The Future of Cats in a Changing World


To many people, cats are mysterious, aloof, and inscrutable. Indeed, there is much we do not know about cats and their behavior. Yet, in the Western world, cats have become one of the most popular companion animals and have even eclipsed in number “man’s best friend,” the dog. But with this popularity has come concern for the welfare of cats, because we are making demands of them they have never experienced before.

The central thesis of the book is that the future of domestic cats is uncertain due to the changing demands placed on them by modern society. We demand that cats change their predatory ways, despite the fact that until recently, we cultivated and prized cats for their predatory prowess. We expect cats to get along with unfamiliar cats and people of our—not their—choosing—despite their solitary ancestry and limited social skills. Finally, we expect cats to adapt to sudden and dramatic changes in their physical environments and even to tolerate confinement in small apartments, although adaptation to such changes and confinement have never been significant parts of their history. Bradshaw argues that it is people’s ignorance of the cat’s history, biology, and behavioral needs that is driving these expectations. So the major goal of the book is to present what we know about cats, what we do not know but need to know, and how we can use the knowledge we have to improve the lives of cats.

In this book written for the general public, Bradshaw assembles an impressive breadth of knowledge about cats including their evolutionary and domestication histories, sensory and cognitive abilities, personalities, interactions with wildlife, and social lives with people and other cats. We found the book highly readable and loaded with up-to-date information and insights that will be valuable to cat caregivers as well as professionals interested in cats.

For us, the book brought up two issues we thought were particularly important to those concerned with the welfare of cats. The first is the degree to which the cat’s biological heritage constrains adaptation to modern Western world living. The second is how little we know about the influences of learning and experience on cats’ adaptation to new living conditions. Bradshaw points out that “… cats still have three out of four feet firmly planted in their wild origins”
(p. xx), meaning they are barely domesticated, because a good portion of their breeding is still not controlled by humans. Most people underappreciate how little cats have changed during the thousands of years they have lived with people and thus how tied they are to their solitary, hunter origins. Put another way, people overestimate the adaptability of cats to different locations or environments, events and experiences, and unfamiliar people and other cats. Cats do have some flexibility in this regard but not as much as dogs, to whom they are habitually compared, and not as much as most cat caregivers would like.

For example, people seem to believe that cats should be able to live amicably with almost any other cat. Perhaps this is because people see a room full of cats quietly cohabiting together at a shelter, or they knew someone who had several cats apparently living together peaceably. As Bradshaw points out, the default condition of cats is to be wary and unfriendly to cats with whom they have not been raised. For most cats, interactions with unfamiliar cats are stressful. Yet people either are unaware of it or ignore the distress and think it will go away quickly. Cats sitting quietly in cages or in groups in shelters may not be calmly tolerating their environment, but instead, they have reduced their activities to avoid conflict. Social stress in multiple-cat homes often results in one cat sequestering himself or herself to a small part of the house to avoid other cats, but caregivers too frequently view this as acceptable.

Those of us who work with cat behavior problems know that getting unfamiliar cats to live together peaceably can be time-consuming and difficult, and it is not always successful. People need to have more realistic expectations about how quickly and how well cats will adapt to changes in their living conditions. Having accurate knowledge about the behavioral predispositions of cats can go a long way to minimizing the distress of cats.

This leads to the second issue: How easy is it to change these behavioral predispositions through socialization, early experiences, and later training? Bradshaw tells us that because people think cats cannot be trained (a falsehood), we have neglected socialization and other early experiences as well as more formal training in helping cats adapt to their changing lifestyles. Behavioral experts such as veterinary behaviorist Kersti Seksel have promoted early socialization classes for kittens (Kitten Kindys), but beyond this, there are few recommendations for socialization and training experiences for cats. It is a gap that needs to be explored because as Bradshaw points out, we have only two ways to try to help cats adapt to change—through learning on the individual level, which can be very rapid, or through selective breeding for more desirable traits on the population level, which can take many years.

So what kinds of experiences would help cats to adapt? We have very little information about the social, mental, and exercise needs of cats. Without systematic knowledge, our socialization and training protocols will be based on guesses and trial and error—not a desirable situation.

For example, among the many questions to which we need answers are: Do cats need to have access to the outdoors either restricted or not? How much time should they be outdoors and what are the limits of restrictions? For cats who are kept exclusively indoors, enrichment is recommended. But what activities constitute enrichment and how often do they need to be done? What, if any, experiences early in life would help cats adapt to an indoor life or other physical restrictions? What, if any, experiences early in life would help cats to live more amicably with unfamiliar cats and people and suppress hunting of small animals? Are there specific experiences later in life that would help cats adapt to living in restricted environments and with other cats and unfamiliar people, or experiences that would help to inhibit hunting?
Answers to these questions will help us provide a better quality of life for our cats who are faced with rapid changes to their lifestyles. In the meantime, we recommend Bradshaw’s book to get those who care about cats thinking more broadly about what we can do to improve their quality of life.

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